

The stay in the luxurious bed and breakfast in Ballyvaughn kicked up my average room rent to \$70 a day. All reservations were confirmed ahead of time in Mertzon over the wire, or by e-mail. The Irish Tourist Bureau's website listed B&B's for each town. Rates were standard, depending on the class of the establishment.

At breakfast the last morning, the owner told the next table he and his wife were flying to Los Angeles to vacation in Las Vegas in November. He made the second Irish innkeeper to mention a Las Vegas holiday. On the local buses, serious discussions also took place about the odds on racehorses. In County Clare, every farmhouse raised yellow banners supporting the hurling team playoff in Dublin to a point, I suspect, that went deeper than just hanging a flag on a pole.

Fueled by black coffee, I put the evidence together to conclude that a strong gaming instinct must exist in the country. When he came for my order, I said, "John, you know, it's hard to put a price on such personal service as you offer." I paused, "In these three short days, I have come to look upon you and your wife, Rita, as my friends."

He stopped, lowered the coffee pot as if to pour in my full cup. Nodding his head, he replied, "The feeling is mutual. Rita said this morning how charming people are from the southern part of the U.S."

"So, John," I said, "let's keep things that way. I know it's going to be awkward to bill me. Don't bother to itemize my account; I trust you implicitly, as a gentleman should. Just bet the amount in Las Vegas, deduct expenses, send me my half of the winnings, or bill me for my half of the losses."

Hard to tell when a Irish fellow's face turns red, yet the flush that hit ol' John exceeded the post-dawn rising of the new sun after a storm at sea. He was nowhere around at my departure. The account was already closed on my credit card. I suppose he didn't like good-bye's.

Charges at smaller places required cash. Restaurants and shops honored credit cards and traveler's checks. The Bank of Ireland maintains ATMs on major travel routes. The Irish call the automatic tellers "a hole in the bank." After a lifetime of facing stern jugkeepers, I enjoyed being far enough away from home to share in the levity of the people.

However, the way the market reports sounded, farmers weren't in any better shape to be making jokes around the jugs than we are in the shortgrass country. Two old men on a bus told me subsidies inspire the sheepmen to shift animals from farm to neighboring farm ahead of the government auditors to help friends increase their payments.

To squelch this good neighbor policy, the government started putting bright red and blue paint brands on the sheep about the size of a gallon paint bucket. On fresh-shorn ewes, the splotch is visible way up on the hillsides.

Paint damage to the wool doesn't matter, as the prices are so low that many outfits don't bother to haul it to town.

Cattle are quoted in the markets as being "double-punched bullocks," meaning the two tags in the ears signify the owner received two subsidies beforehand on a two year-old steer. Thus his share in the price will come to less money. One farmer asked if we double-punched our cattle. I told him we had cowboys who were "double-punched" from overexertion on Saturday night and missed Monday roundups, but nothing to resemble their system.

Herds of livestock ranged along the road in the Burren. The grazing pattern is the reverse of other countries. Cattle graze in the lowlands in the summer behind stone fences 400 or more years old. In the winter, they are moved to the highlands. The big sheets of limestone hold the summer heat, and rich plant life grows in the cracks to provide winter grazing. Irish winters are mild. Frost burns off by 10 in the morning. Ocean currents moderate the weather.

The only bovine I worked at close hand was a huge dun-colored bull dragging a heavy nose chain. We met him head on going from water to an upper pasture up a narrow trail sided by steep banks. Irish cattle carry strains of dairy blood, and milk cow bulls are fierce characters. The guide muttered, "Watch him, he may be wicked." My partner and I yielded as much right of way as the embankment allowed.

Safe back at the car, we dumped dirt scaled from  
hugging the cliffside from our hip pockets and pants cuffs.  
I visualized a death certificate in an Irish mortuary  
reading, "Cause of death: two Americans gored by a dun bull  
too mean to be contained by a ring chain in his nose."